



## A netnographic study of P2P collaborative consumption platforms' user interface and design<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Although still embryonic, collaborative consumption and the sharing economy have become social and economic phenomena in just a few short years, yet there is little consensus on how to define them. The current classificatory schema or typologies of platforms have some weaknesses. Sectoral classifications, technological functionality, and discursive modes of understanding sharing and collaborative economies all provide valuable insights, but when taken individually important gaps are evident, not least in their inter-system isolation, but most particularly when technology, such as platform architecture and user interfaces, is disassociated from wider social and economic conditions of possibility. In order to build on previous research we set out to develop a more complex understanding of collaborative consumption by studying platform architecture, interface, design and informational content to examine how technological affordances of digital platforms' structure social interaction. In order to carry out the research we designed a netnographic protocol that systematised data collection across four dimensions of platforms' technological structure and informational content: *functionality and usability*; *trust and virtual reputation*; *codes of conduct and community footprint*. Data was collected on fifty-five platforms, including forty-seven across Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain, as well as eight international platforms. Following factor and cluster analysis, and on the basis of the theoretical understandings of the sharing and collaborative economy, we developed a typology that grouped platforms into three groups: *network, transaction and community oriented*.

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### 1. Introduction

Although still embryonic, collaborative consumption and the sharing economy have become social and economic phenomena in just a few short years. Yet there is little consensus on what they are; collaborative economy, sharing economy, gig economy, on-demand economy, peer economy, are just some of the terminology that have been commonly used to describe this area of economic and social practice. Despite the apparent novelty of these terms, collaborative, sharing and communal practices already existed and are well rooted in societies across the world, and are documented in a rich stream of research

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(Lamberton, 2016). It is also clear that industrialization and the shift to individualist consumer oriented societies in the 19th and 20th century did much to undermine and reduce such communal practices (McLaren and Child, 2013). However, and somewhat ironically, such social and economic changes also foregrounded the popular return to ‘sharing’ that we have witnessed in the last number of years. Excessive consumption throughout the later half of the 20th century, for example, would create a massive stockpile of under-used assets –recently valued at \$5 trillion (PWC, 2015)– the ‘unlocking’ of which is one of the cornerstones of the sharing and collaborative economy proposition. The backdrop of economic recession and impending environmental catastrophe would also make the disaffected millennial generation eager recipients of the sharing and collaborative economy propositions.

Collaborative and sharing economy platforms offer a cultural antidote to individualism, through shared community values, and greater consumer empowerment, not only as purchasers in terms of choice and convenience, but most uniquely as prosumers,<sup>1</sup> or micro-entrepreneurs (Torregosa, 2013). Through horizontal and participatory structures the sharing and collaborative model has proffered a paradigm shift that could “solve many of the complex challenges the world faces” (Ouishare, para. 2). And of course, the collaborative economy is driven and enabled by digital technology and infrastructure that makes possible the economies of scale necessary for distributed networks. Furthermore, the technological functionalities of platforms (websites and apps) enable, facilitate and mediate exchanges and sharing between peers to create alternate and stable marketplaces that subvert traditional producer to consumer models.

Mostly driven by economic, cultural and technological factors (Barnes and Mattsson, 2016) the success and popularity of these multi-sided marketplaces (Hagi and Wright, 2015) is evident in a current market valuation and exponential growth predictions<sup>2</sup> (PWC, 2015), as well as current and predicted consumer participation rates (Nielsen, 2014; OCU, 2016). However, it is important to note that the sharing and collaborative economy extends beyond reuse and redistribution of consumer goods and services to finance, education, transport and almost all areas of social and economic activity. It also includes not just the well-known billion dollar entities, but also many small, community oriented and not-for-profit platforms.

Yet, the supposed benefits of a transition from ownership economies to access, collaboration and sharing haven’t convinced everyone (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015; Orsi and Daskow, 2009). The strongest criticism centres on whether collaboration and sharing isn’t just “capitalism on steroids” (Morozov, 2013; para.10) extending its reach to previously informal parts of the economy, while diversifying economic risk to further destructured and precarious labour (Kalamar, 2013; Walker, 2015). Its market advantage is also viewed as being anchored in a subversion of regulatory and fiscal systems (CNMC, 2016). Furthermore, platforms’ radical anti-establishment ideology has also been questioned, along with any supposed change from individualistic consumption to sustainable practices (Schor, 2014; Hamari et al., 2015). There is also some doubt about whether it really strengthens social bonds (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Parigi and State, 2014) and reduces inequalities and discrimination (Edelman and Luca, 2014; Schor et al., 2016).

Why such conflicting perspectives? Part of the problem seems to reside in the fact that there is no consensus on what sharing and collaborative economies are (Botsman, 2013; Schor, 2014). As Botsman (2015) has pointed out “many terms are being used to describe a broad swath of startups and models that in some way use digital technologies to directly match service and goods providers with customers” (para.1). Attempts to define and understand sharing and collaboration as forms of consumption and social practice can be seen through a number of prisms that taken individually don’t appear to provide wholly satisfactory systems with which to grasp the complexity of activity and focus of platforms who share commonalities but that also differ greatly.

In the conceptual overview we examine some of these systems, which include: *sectoral classifications*, based on offering/transaction type; *technological understandings* that examine the role of computer architecture and user interfaces that allow peers to engage in stable and safe environments and even build virtual reputations; *discourse, representations, and values* as a means to define and understand notions of sharing and collaboration, which as we have mentioned are hotly contested; and other approaches, which might be loosely defined as *materialist*, that seek to cut across preceding approaches to look at what kind of doing or performing occurs during sharing and collaborative practices in their socio-cultural and historic contexts.

While, each of these approaches provides valuable insights and understandings, our approach sets out from the materialist viewpoint that technology and socio-cultural meanings are intertwined and inseparable (Sábada and Gordo, 2008). In line with previous research (Finkel et al., 2013; Cassidy et al., in prep), we present an ethnographic analysis specific to the case of fifty-five Collaborative Consumption (CC) platforms as the technological and material conditions of possibility for peer-to-peer social interactions in one ambit of the sharing economy. Commissioned by four national consumer organisations the research employs a netnographic research methodology that studies platform architecture, user-interface, design and informational content to examine how technological *affordances* (Norman, 1988) of digital collaborative consumption platforms structure social production in online interactions. By proposing a typology of three types of collaborative consumption platform that cuts across sectoral, technological and discursive understandings we consider what type of ‘doing’ these platforms encourage, facilitate or direct and so propose an alternative method of understanding and researching collaborative consumption.

<sup>1</sup> “A private individual who provides, produces or trades goods or services not related to their habitual business, trade or profession” (OCU 2016, p.7).

<sup>2</sup> Currently estimated at \$15bn and forecast to grow twenty-fold by 2025 (PWC, 2015).

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